

The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present. Michael Paris, Ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000, 267pp. \$52.00 cloth; \$20.00 paper.

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While the Great War was not the first conflict to be recorded by the motion picture camera (a distinction that belongs to the Boer War and the Spanish-American War), it was the first war, as Michael Paris tells us, in which “cinema was used as an agent of mass persuasion by the governments of the combatant nations” (1). For this reason, this critical anthology is important, for it is the first such book to really attempt to show how combatant nations have, with varying degrees of efficiency and success, developed national film industries as a direct consequence of the War. Paris has rounded up an impressive international roster of film historians to tell the story of the profound interconnections between film, national identity, and the Great War in Britain, France, the U.S., Canada, Australia, Germany, Russia, Austria, and Poland. The contributors focus on both fictional film narratives and documentary films, in some cases showing how the convenient distinction between the two is blurred when representing (and, even, reconstructing) the experience of war on film.

Reading these twelve essays in sequence, one is struck by how combatant nations’ political and military elites had to be educated about how effective the new medium could be; for most, it wasn’t self-evident. One of the very best contributors, Nicholas Reeves, tells the story of how it wasn’t until the middle of 1916, almost halfway through the war, before the British War Office made an effective propaganda film. Reeves adduces, very plausibly, two main reasons for this unwillingness to exploit the power of moving visual imagery: class snobbery regarding the popular medium and, once the Brits were aware of the power of the medium, fear of what it could show. Thus, the British government in August 1914 put in place strict censorship constraints, and it took several years for filmmakers to learn how to work within them. But once the government realized how effective the medium could be, 240 propaganda films were released, with an additional 152 issues of official newsreel. The Italian film industry, by contrast, independently jumped on the bandwagon almost immediately when the country entered the war in 1915, releasing fictional film romances within 3 months. Giovanni Nobili Vitelleschi’s essay reveals how the industry benefited from a lack

of official interference, popularly expressing the mass audience's desire for fantasies of team spirit and undying patriotism until the end of the war. To tell another contrasting story, in Russia, the 1917 Revolution put an end to Czar Nicholas's efficient deployment of the film industry for patriotic purposes (Denise Youngblood informs us that nearly half of the 103 Russian feature films produced in the latter half of 1914 concerned the war).

The wide-ranging scope of Paris's anthology is useful in demonstrating that while literature influenced the educated elite to "imagine" the First World War after 1918 in certain specific ways, it was the medium of film that influenced the masses. And, as Paris points out in his introduction, "film continues to provide the dominant popular national interpretation of that War for most people" (2). The essays centered on post-1918 fictional film narratives effectively show the War is revisited time and again to forge national identities, but, again, with varying degrees of engagement. The Soviet cinema for 60 years, with very few exceptions, as Youngblood shows, almost completely ignored the Great War as an occasion for fictional narratives. By contrast, Poland's film industry has produced almost 40 feature films thematically centered on the war. An especially interesting essay is Ina Bertrand's critical analysis of the construction of the nationalist myth of the "digger" combatant, a hardy and brash hero who symbolizes the Australian national spirit. Paris's anthology, in sum, succeeds in telling the story of how war and technology gave birth to national cinema, which of all forms of storytelling and representation, most changed how the world imagined war.